CROSSROADS IN CAIRO, 1942

19, RUE HAWAYATI

WHERE THREE EMPIRES MET

PATRICIA AZARIAS
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
2016

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student: _____

Date: _____

Acknowledgements

My first debt is to the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) for providing me with several essential ingredients: my wonderful supervisor, Professor Paula Hamilton; financial support for the writing and the research, both in Australia and abroad; the flexibility and innovative spirit making the submission of a non-traditional Ph.D. thesis possible; and the original catalyst for the project, Professor Andrew Jakubowicz.

I had the remarkable good fortune to have been allocated Paula Hamilton as a supervisor. One of her other students said to me once that every time he leaves a meeting with Paula he is walking on air. For over three years I have had just the same experience. Encouraging, available, perceptive, humorous, informed, constructive, and ruthless, she provided the ideal direction for a large and somewhat unusual project. Words cannot express my gratitude to Paula. I could never have done this project without her.

UTS is a young, creative and stimulating university whose spirit is a little different from that of its more traditional counterparts. This in no way means it disregards rigour, rather, that it encourages students to explore innovative ways of discovering and expressing their findings. I have benefited from this approach, and have taken advantage of it.

UTS also provided the original stimulus for the project in the form of Professor Andrew Jakubowicz. Some years ago, I mentioned to Prof. Jakubowicz my interest in exploring the three stories that related to my mother, or rather, the three routes that led to her, and he encouraged me to pursue the project, began the process of obtaining financial support for me, called my mother "the point of intersection" of those three routes, thus giving me an instant structure, and introduced me to Paula Hamilton. I am very grateful to him.

None of the failings of this thesis can be attributed to either of them, of course.

I have appreciated the help of Bob Carr, then Foreign Minister of Australia, in helping to secure access for me to the Regina Coeli prison in Rome and Fort Bravetta on the outskirts. He energetically sought to obtain access to SIS files for me as well, but SIS policy is never to open them except to a tiny handful of approved researchers. I was not one of them, despite the fact that information on many of the characters in the Zaccaria story was publicly available in the National Archives in Rome.

My uncle Élie Nahum in Milan, the Nahum family historian and author of a delightful memoir on his years in Egypt, was the most lively, forthcoming and informative interlocutor possible. Élie, now in his mid nineties, gave me books, photographs, family trees, letters, documents, and, most important, his time and knowledge of the Nahum family and its history. I spent many weeks with Élie and his cousin Yolande Bigio (whose mother was a Nahum) in Milan, and could hardly keep up with their energy and their floods of reminiscences. Yolande's twin sister, Sylvia, in Sydney, was actually my first family port of call in the earliest weeks of the project, and she has been an unfailing source of encouragement and inside knowledge.

For Section 1, ZACCARIA, I am indebted to Andrea Torre, Deputy Director of the Istituto Nazionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione Italiano (INSMLI), who unearthed for me many documents, books and records relating to Alessandro Zaccaria, and also found Amaury Zaccaria's last remaining relatives, Aurora and her daughter Marina

Mandelli. I am also grateful to Mike Rann, Australian Ambassador in Rome and Sabrina Albanese, Research Officer, Political, Economic and Public Diplomacy, Australian Embassy, Rome, for arranging my visits to the Regina Coeli prison and Forte Bravetta; to Dottoressa Anna Angeletti, Deputy Director of the Regina Coeli Prison in Rome and her staff; to Librarian Maria Pina di Simone, Archivi Centrali dello Stato, Rome and her staff; to Librarian Maria Bergamaschi of the Archivio di Stato di Roma; to Sr. Giovanni Pelluso, who wrote an article on the Zaccaria brothers (in Italian) and who, with Sra. Pelluso, took the trouble to drive me to the beach where they landed; to Roderick Bailey, who generously shepherded me through National Archives documents in Kew, helped clarify my thoughts on the Zaccaria brothers, and pointed me to the Dobrski Archive in Kings College, London; to my mother's first cousins Sylvia Nahum and Élie Nahum for sharing their memories of both Amaury and Egon in Cairo and Alexandria; to Zdenka Zorica, of the Municipal Office of Lovran, who took tremendous trouble to find the old Zaccaria address, closed her office, and walked me there; and to the volunteer at the Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste, who found for me the record of Alessandro Zaccaria's execution.

For Section 2, NAHUM, I am indebted to my mother's first cousins, Élie Nahum, Sylvia Nahum, and Yolande Bigio, as well as to Albert Bigio (dec'd); to Albert Arié, (Titi), the only Jewish-born man in Cairo's seven-strong Jewish community and a man of extraordinary bravery and integrity, who guided me through the Cairo of his youth and his age; to Magda and Mireille Haroun, daughter and widow of Shehata Haroun, famous comrade of Titi; to Joel Hakim, who introduced me to Titi and who shared with me his memories of the Cairo of his youth; to Laurence Abensur-Hazan, who introduced me to the Smyrna of the past and the Izmir of the present; to Roza Benjuya (90), who spent hours with me reminiscing about her upbringing in Smyrna; to another of my mother's first cousins, Jacques Nahum, famous French cineaste, for sharing his memories of Cairo with me; to Ralph Hayat, another cousin in Paris; to Émile Gabbai, Élie's publisher and another ex-Cairene, for taking me to gatherings of former Alexandrians and Cairenes in Paris; to Mlle

Lévine, of the library of the Alliance Universelle Israélite in Paris, for the hours she spent guiding me through the archives; to the staff of the Center for Jewish History in New York, for their generosity in giving me books and helping with contacts; to the librarians of the Patronat Call de Girona and the National Library of Spain in Madrid; to Nessim Franco, the beadle of the Beth Israel Synagogue in Izmir, who overcame his suspicions and took me through its interior; to the rabbi of Neve Shalom Synagogue in Istanbul; to Alvaro Iranzo Gutiérrez, Consul-General of Spain in Sydney, who took considerable trouble to arrange programs for me in Spain; to Laure Haddad, who arranged my visit to Egypt, and to all the staff in Cairo who did so much to facilitate my trip, and to my second cousin, Dr Roland Loeve, for the obituary of his mother, Léa Loeve, née Nahum.

For Section 3, DONOVAN, I am grateful to Mr Don Phillips and the helpful volunteers of the Bexhill Museum, who took the trouble to find my grandparents' address; to Ruth Bloom, who found documents relating to my father and his forebears; and to various Nahum family members who remembered my father.

Throughout this project, my husband John Azarias has provided encouragement, and has shown forbearance over my long absences from Sydney, for all of which I am most grateful.

Preface

The day I buried my mother I finally opened the box she had hidden on the top shelf of her wardrobe, and for the first time I understood who she had been.

Throughout my childhood in Sydney there had often been stifled hints, evasions, quick glances between her and my aunt, and sudden silences from her cousins. It had all skated over my mind. Then there had been my accidental discovery, when I was fifteen, of a tiny yellowed newspaper cutting announcing her marriage to my father, but her name in the notice was someone else's, not her maiden name. It said she was a widow. She had never explained and I had never asked. In the back of my mind was the knowledge that for years she kept a secret box at the back of the top shelf of her bedroom wardrobe – a cardboard suitcase-like container, its hard plastic handle fitting through a cutout in the lid, that had originally housed her fur stole from the days when my father was still giving her gifts. The box was blue and battered. I was vaguely aware that she had hidden it behind old sheets, wooden artefacts carved by the Italian prisoners of war billeted in my parents' house in Cairo, rusty tablecloths embroidered by a great-aunt in the Ottoman tradition, and other discouragements to the curious. Too green, too absent, too preoccupied with studies and a career, I knew almost nothing about the box and its contents. When I came back to Australia after twenty years away, I knew even less. It lay forgotten and buried in its hiding place.

But somehow its existence must have sunk into the recesses of my memory, because suddenly, on the way back to my mother's apartment from the cemetery, as I stared out blindly through the car window, a picture of the box, seablue, bulging, too full to close properly, materialised sharp and vivid in front of my eyes, and I knew without question that if I wanted to bring my mother back – and dear God, I wanted to bring my mother back – the only way was to open it at last.

The shock of her accident was only four days old. My mother Sol – the sun in Ladino – had been a very young 83, fit, vigorous, demanding, imperious. There was no lift to her third floor apartment and five times a day she would bound up the stairs and skip down. She thought nothing of walking a mile a day. At 74, she had joined me on my UN posting in Zimbabwe, ridden horses in the midst of rhinos and giraffes on weeklong jeep-less safaris, snapped pictures of charging bull elephants from five yards away, and been invited to numberless parties. My mother loved parties.

That morning, she had bought a new pair of shoes. They had heels, and another thing my mother loved was new shoes with heels. She and another 83-year-old girlfriend were going to play bridge with a younger girl of 81, who lived at the bottom of a flight of stairs. My mother and the girlfriend paused at the top of the stairs. Construction was going on and there was rubble lying in random heaps all the way down. The handrail had been removed. My mother gaily told her girlfriend that she was going to put on her new high heels.

"No, no, why don't you wait till we get down to the bottom of the stairs," the wiser 83-year-old suggested.

Character is destiny.

It seems that my mother insisted. "No, I want to put them on now!"

So she unlaced the sensible brogues she was wearing, took out the new little white high-heeled sandals, and put them on. Halfway down the stairs, one of the new heels caught on a stair and my mother was unable to regain her footing. It happens when your leg muscles aren't what

they once were. And when there is no railing to hold on to. She tumbled head over heels and two steps from the bottom landed on her head.

She sat up, and at first she seemed to be speaking quite normally, even merrily, but after a few minutes her speech became slurred. She was unable to get to her feet. Her friend panicked, rang the doorbell of the 81-year-old, and called an ambulance. My mother was still trying to speak and move her hands.

At that moment I was in the city giving a speech to a conference. No-one interrupted me, and at the end I was flushed and triumphant, like an actor after a performance. Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"A phone call for you".

"It's probably nothing, but your mother is in St Vincent's Hospital at the moment. Can you leave now?" I will always be grateful to my assistant Caterina for that "probably nothing".

At the hospital my mother's eyes were closed. Her small brown arm with its delicate Nahum wrist lay on the blanket. She was wearing her best watch. I took her thin hand in mine and asked her,

"Tu m'entends?" (Can you hear me?)

No reply.

In French – after all, we were from pre-revolutionary Cairo -- I said,

"If you can hear me, squeeze my hand".

There was an almost imperceptible squeeze. Although I didn't know it then, that was the last communication I was ever to have from my mother.

I told her it was nothing, that she just needed to rest and that she would be fine in the morning. I believed it then, too.

What happened next is a blur. The only thing I remember is that a kind young Chinese neurologist – later I would discover it was Dr Charlie Teo, not yet as famous as he would become – took me into small room and explained that my mother would never recover, that her brain had

swelled inside her skull. For some reason I still don't understand, it was not possible to remove part of the skull to allow the swelling to escape. The most we could hope for was that my mother would survive as a vegetable.

Bizarrely, a picture of myself wheeling my semi-comatose mother out on to the grass at the seafront at Bronte Beach, and putting my cheek against hers in the sunshine, arose unbidden in my mind's eye. Bronte Beach? I barely knew Bronte Beach. But there it was. I told the doctor I would joyfully give up job, house, career, if it meant I could have the privilege of looking after her. He didn't smile. I still didn't understand that there was no hope.

For three days I came to the hospital and sat by her bed as she slept on. Even when they wheeled her into a room on her own, I still didn't understand. On the third night, exhausted, I went home to sleep. At midnight, the phone rang. A broad Aussie accent told me matter-of-factly that my mother had

At the funeral at Sydney's Chevra Kadisha, almost a hundred people came for a woman with no money, no position, nothing to offer but her personality. At the Rookwood cemetery she gave me the best gift on earth, an understanding of love.

And now, I was on the way back to her apartment, with the picture of the blue box floating sharp and insistent through the white blur in front of my eyes. When I arrived at her apartment, I dragged a chair to the wardrobe and climbed up. The box was there, at the back of the top shelf, behind a jumble of sheets, wooden objects, tablecloths, and placemats. I freed it, took it by its handle, climbed down, carefully laid it on her bed, and, at long last, opened it.

A jumble. Yellowed newspapers from 1942. Photographs. Letters. Official documents, a marriage certificate, a death certificate, from an Italian prison. A note from a prison chaplain. Names I had never heard. It all spilled out as if it had been waiting to be freed.

As I rummaged through the papers, three photographs seemed to appear and reappear on different thicknesses of paper, some copies on glossy photographic stock, some on matt, some simply on ordinary photocopier paper. In one, my mother, perhaps 30 or so, was leaning back against a gate, a secret smile on her face. Next to her, obviously the other half of the couple, stood a confident, burly man with a strong masculine presence that jumped into life straight off the black and white surface of the paper. I had no idea who that man was, but I could see right away that my mother was deeply contented.

In a second, and there were nine or ten different prints and copies of the same photo, a group of eleven family members, dressed in the fashion of the very early twentieth century, stared solemnly out at the photographer. The oldest, a man probably in his seventies, was wearing a tarboush. The youngest was a baby in elaborate dress, on the knees of its father. I turned one of those copies over, and at the back of the baby, someone had written "Solette". My mother? But I had no idea who all the other people were. And why was the old man wearing a tarboush?

I had never seen the third. It was a large photograph of my parents on their wedding day. It had been torn.

As I started discovering the truth, I was to learn that behind these three photographs lay three extraordinary stories, which intersected in the slight figure of my mother. I was to travel to nine countries, work in nineteen archival institutes, visit numerous places of relevance and interest, and talk with scores of people. I was to discover who the confident man standing next to her had been, how idealism and a taste for risk had brought him to Egypt, and what his terrible fate was. I was to find out that behind the family group stretched, over more than five centuries, the rich and turbulent history of a people unfamiliar to the English-speaking world. I made up my mind that these three stories, these three streams that converged in my mother, these three paths to my mother, were worth exploring, worth describing, worth being made known to others beside myself. And it was the best way I had of finding out just what had made my mother what she was.

So in the end, it was not just to bring my mother back that I wanted to tell these stories. It was to honour the man standing beside her, to try to bring to life a culture and a society that lived for hundreds of years but that is now almost dead, and to discover the environment that had produced my father. But it was my mother, my small, difficult, optimistic, innocent, life-loving mother, who was the point of intersection of these three stories, of everything that I found in that bulging blue cardboard box that I laid on her bed that bright summer day in February nearly twenty years ago. This thesis is for her.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements iii

Preface vii

List of Maps xv

Abstract xviii

Introduction 1

1. ZACCARIA:
The Path from Laurana and the Austro-Hungarian Empire 27

a. The Mission, 1942 28

i. Landing, October 28

ii. Capture, October 49

iii. Prisons, October/November 67

iv. Execution at Forte Bravetta, November 101

v. Aftermath 110

b. Understanding background and motivation:
Excursion into the past 113

i. The Zaccaria dynasty in the Austro-Hungarian Empire:
Grandfather Francesco 113

ii. The Zaccaria Dynasty: Father Alessandro Zaccaria 120

iii. Finding the Zaccaria house 135

c. Back in Cairo, 1941-2 and 2014 141

2. NAHUM:
The Path from Toledo and The Ottoman Empire 177

a. Familiar Strangers in the Photograph 179

b. Toledo, starting point 193

c. Antiquity to Muslim Invasion of 711 A.D. 201

d. Muslim Period, 711 A.D. – 1492 204

e. Expulsion: 1492 206

Table of Contents (continued)

f. Amsterdam: 1492 – ~1625 221

g. Life in Ottoman Smyrna: ~1625 – 1906 225

i. Smyrna, Patchwork of Cultures 225

ii. Synagogues and the Nahum house 250

iii. Sabbatai Sevi 260

iv. The Alliance Israëlite Universelle 263

v. Wedding Customs among the Jews 265

vi. Cemeteries in Smyrna 265

h. Life in Cairo: 1906 – 1948 276

i. Nostalgia 276

ii. The Seder of 1919, as my mother remembered it 281

iii. Élie goes to school 288

iv. David and Élie in the Hammam 292

v. Akela, beks, beks, beks, AOUU 295

3. DONOVAN:
The Path from Bexhill-on-Sea and the British Empire 299

Conclusion 348

Appendices 357

1. Timelines 360

2. The Ladino Language 363

3. The Incorruptible 371

Bibliography 381

List of Maps

Licola Beach, Pozzuoli and Bay of Naples 43
Austro-Hungarian Empire 114
Istria today 125
19, rue Hawayati (Youssef El Guindy today), Point of Intersection 149
The Farewell Trek 215
The Ottoman Empire with Egypt 224
Quarters of Smyrna 236
Slave Route including Liverpool 307
The Unfortunate Voyage of the Belle of Ireland 314
The entrance to the Humber 315
Donovan, Mylrea, Waring 317
British influence in the Middle East 337
Wanderings of the Nahums 357

Abstract

The focal point of this non-traditional Ph.D. thesis is the apartment at no. 19, rue Hawayati in central Cairo, where my mother Sol, one of the last of a long line of Spanish Jews, lived in the nineteen thirties and forties.

The two sections bookending this thesis, Section 1: ZACCARIA and Section 3: DONOVAN explore the hitherto unknown stories of my mother's two husbands, both wartime intelligence agents, one an Italian anti-fascist spy working in clandestinity for the British in Egypt, the other an officer in British Army Intelligence and the Secret Intelligence Service, both of them meeting entirely different fates.

Section 2: NAHUM, set in between, traces the background of her people over fifteen centuries, from Jerusalem to Spain, then, successively, Amsterdam, Smyrna, Cairo and Sydney.

Exploring these three narratives took me down three paths to the crossroads in Cairo, 1942, namely to 19, rue Hawayati, the point of intersection of the three routes that I follow in the thesis. Each of the paths that converged on that focal point emerged from one of the three empires: the Austro-Hungarian for the ZACCARIA section, the Ottoman (NAHUM) and the British (DONOVAN). I followed all those paths *in situ*, undertaking several journeys over the forty months of this project, visiting nine countries and some nineteen institutes and organisations. I have woven into the text my own research experiences, and occasionally, some clearly signaled imaginative reconstructions where no sources were available, and have sought to place the individual stories firmly within their historical contexts.

Several themes appear throughout: the effects of nationalist impulses on the societies where they appear; the complexities of identity, especially in the Levant; the role of memory in the recreation of historical narrative; and, perhaps most fundamentally, the way individuals may either be swept along by larger historical forces, or find ways of facing them head on and emerging undefeated.